Moving at Snail's Pace: Some Observations on the Publication Process in Social and Personality Psychology

By Miles Hewstone and Wolfgang Stroebe

According to Dr Johnson, nothing that is read with pleasure was written without pain. He must have had in mind authors who submit to peer review in our leading journals, but if they ever read their own work, once it is finally published, it is surely less with pleasure than with . . . relief. We have thought about problems with the journal publication process for a long time -- not only as editors, but also as 'customers'—and within the confines of a brief *Dialogue* piece, we share here a few of our own thoughts, criticisms, and ideas for change and improvement.

Since the first rule of giving feedback is to start with the positives, let us begin by emphasizing our faith in the peer review process. As scholars with decades of experience as journal editors and as authors of numerous articles we are confident that we have helped to improve many a manuscript, and happily acknowledge the contributions many reviewers and editors have made to our own work. We express our gratitude to editors and reviewers for their help in turning some of our sow's ears into the occasional silk purse, and our forgiveness to those (well, OK, almost all of those …) we feel have slighted our work, impugned our motives, or worse! So, some of our best friends are editors, we ourselves have taken the oath and signed in blood, but still believe that we can all do better.

Our leading journals remain some of the most demanding, selective organs for the dissemination of psychological research. We maintain, however, that improvement should be contemplated

in the following three ways.

(1) Reviewers as Editors and Editors as (Co-)Authors

Editors are editors. Their name is on the journal and it is their responsibility to decide whether a manuscript is accepted or rejected (see Zanna, 1992). Editors are not (co-) authors. Their name is not on the manuscript. The names on the manuscript are those of the authors and they are supposed to be responsible for the content of the manuscript. These are truisms, but we thought we should define the two roles at the outset to avoid confusion later.

Editors are chosen as sages of the discipline, typically with wide reading and methodological expertise. They really should not feel the need to have social support for every step of the review process. In short, after having a manuscript reviewed once, they should decide on the revisions themselves. After all, it is their name on the journal and not that of the anonymous reviewers. Furthermore, reviewing takes time. By unloading their responsibility on the shoulders of their reviewers, editors are wasting a valuable resource, namely the time and good will of the unhappy few, who are still willing to review manuscripts.

We are particularly frustrated at the editorial practice of selecting, say, three reviewers for the first version of a paper (based on which the authors then make revisions), and then the addition of some new reviewers (with often quite different opinions) to read the revision. We are not sure when this process originated, or who is brave enough to admit to being its instigator. Suffice to say that we believe that an inner circle of Dante's Hell is reserved for supporters of this cruel and unusual

punishment; they will be condemned for eternity to a perpetual revision of their own manuscripts. Are we as a (sub)discipline unique in this practice? An informal poll of colleagues in other areas and other disciplines suggests that we may be.

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The graph of manuscript improvement against number of revisions is one of diminishing returns; the initial improvements, we submit, are often huge, but the subsequent improvements are often quite minor, if indeed they are improvements. As one of our friends put it, it is not as if we are talking about having our names carved into Mt Rushmore! Furthermore, the content of the article should remain the responsibility of the authors. As the economist Bruno Frey stated succinctly, "Authors only get their papers accepted if they intellectually prostitute themselves by slavishly following the demands made by anonymous referees…" (Frey, 2003; p. 205). Thus we enjoin editors (ourselves included) to remember that the article before them is written by the author, and not the editor, and that the correlation between different reviewers

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is usually rather small (Daniel, 1993). Finally, they should value innovation, ideas and heuristic value, as well as perfect methodology.

(2) The Speed of the Review Process
One of us is feeling particularly guilty at present about his recent review times, and this next point might appear hypocritical. But we can probably all agree that our review process is too slow. If our work is, as it should be at least some of the time, on important social problems, then we should be doing all we can to speed its publication. Would we allow papers on new cancer drugs to languish so long in the editorial doldrums?

The multiple revisions, just discussed, of course also increase the publication lag. The information given by many journals about publication lag is, in our experience, totally misleading, because of the practice of giving "revise and resubmit" as a first decision. The date, which is then reported in the journal as the date when a manuscript has been received, is typically the date for the last revision. Thus, an article may have been in "resubmission" for 2 years, but the time lag reported in the article is 3 months. Increasing the speed of the review process is, we acknowledge, not easy. But we think that use of fewer reviewers, sending out fewer revisions to reviewers, and never sending out revisions to new reviewers would all help.

(3) A New Model
The development of e-first publishing and the Internet provide a unique new opportunity for social psychology. We call upon publishers, professional organizations and editors to work towards leaner (but not meaner), faster dissemination and to exploit the potential of the Internet. Some of the neuroscience journals provide a pattern to follow, with quick reviewing, revision and publication of quite brief reports, and much of the background

literature and methods published on the Internet, rather than taking up expensive, scarce journal space.

Reis and Stiller's (1992) analysis of publication trends in our leading journals reported that, since 1968, published articles in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* had, *inter alia*, become longer and reported research based on more studies. But is this always or necessarily a good thing? We are all familiar with the multi-study paper in which Studies 1-4 are all found to have 'warts' of one type or another, but Study 5 finally gets it right. This new model of publishing would allow the exemplary study to be *published* (quickly and with little journal space sacrificed), but for (some of) the prior studies, attesting replication, to be reported only briefly in the article but *made public* on the website, together with a range of supplementary materials that, over time, might include raw data, videos, and commentary. The APS journal *Psychological Science* is an excellent general model in terms of speed and succinct exposition, but we call for an even more ambitious publishing project devoted to fast-track publishing of top work specifically in social psychology (an idea also floated by Harry Reis, in his President's Column, *Dialogue, 22* (2), Fall, 2007) . . . Anyone for *Social Psychological Science*?

References
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Executive Committee, *Cont.*

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Student travel awards. The Graduate Student Travel Awards Committee had 337 applications, and gave 76 awards of $500 each. An additional 4 awards were reserved fro the student winners of the Graduate Student Committee research competition, who presented their work at a symposium during the conference. The full list of winners appears on p. 36.

Publication Committee. PSPB editor Judy Harackiewicz's term ends in 2008, and the Publication Committee was please to announce that Shinobu Kitayama will be the new Editor, with a five-year term (see p. 13).

The automated manuscript control system that is now in place for *PSPB*, *RapidReview*, will soon be replaced with *SageTrack*, a product of Scholar One. *RapidReview* will be in place until all of the current editor's manuscripts have been processed. The editorial assistant at Wisconsin will stay in place for one more year, serving both Harackiewicz and Kitayama.

There were many important issues discussed about the size of the field, the number and quality of new papers, a plethora of new scientists, and high rates of productivity at all levels. All of these issues suggest it might be time to increase the number of pages in *PSPB*, as well as creating a new journal (or two).

The Executive Committee reiterated that the total number of pages available in any of journals should *not* determine the rejection rate—quality, merit, impact, originality, creativity, timeliness and interest should be the determinants of publication. This